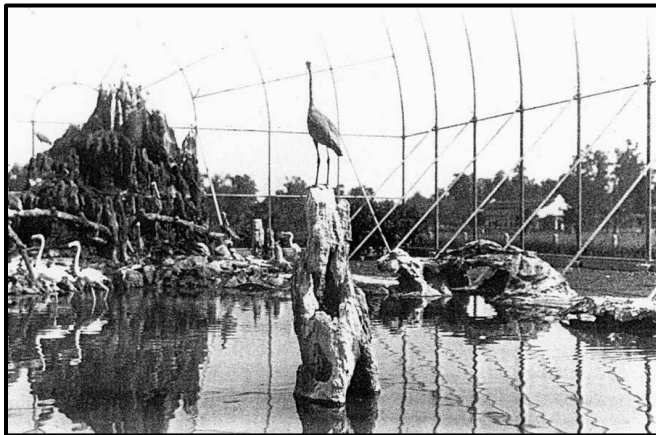
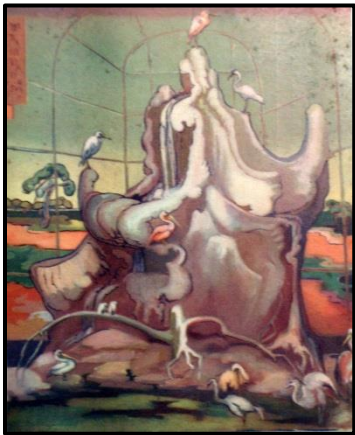


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Ola McNeill Davidson *Bird Haunt* c1928 Oil on Canvas (l); Dionicio Rodriguez [Faux waterfall, trees and other structures created for the aviary of the Houston Zoo, now called the Flamingo Habitat] concrete c1926. Painting of the aviary now lost. Some concrete structures still in place; main waterfall encased in new concrete during later renovation.

HETAG Newsletter No 20, February 2018

The Lost Art Issue

As HETAGers we are dedicated to rediscovering the art of Houston's past. As we've discovered over the last 15 years (Yes, HETAG has been around that long; we had our first meeting in 2003!), there's a lot of it, it's fabulous, and we and our city are lucky indeed to have such a rich art heritage. But sometimes we find that the art we'd like to see has been lost over the decades. Sometimes all we have left of it are photographs; or, all too often, just titles in exhibition listings, newspaper articles or artist letters. So in this issue we have the first of an occasional series called LOST ART, looking at some of those paintings, sculptures and other things that are now gone. But maybe, if we keep our eyes open, we'll spot some of them somewhere, sometime and bring them back to life once again.



Gertrude Barnstone *Sun Catcher* 1953 formed aluminum
Created for the exterior of the U.S. Green Stamp building in Houston. Dismantled in later years and now lost.

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Upcoming HETAG meeting:



Richard Stout *Green Moonrise* 1963, oil on canvas, 36 x 53 inches.
This painting is not lost; we'll see it at our next HETAG meeting.

**Saturday, February 17, 2018
2:30 p.m.**

**Sarah Beth Wilson and Joey McKeel
Have invited us to their home for a visit and a look
at their collection of Early Texas Art.**

**As you probably remember
Sarah Beth is Curator of Exhibitions and Collections
at The Art Museum of Southeast Texas in Beaumont
Where she curated the splendid Richard Stout Exhibition last fall.
That show will travel to Corpus Christi in the Spring and will be here in
Houston at
The O'Kane Gallery of University of Houston Downtown in late 2018.**

**We'll need to set a limit of 20 for this meeting so please RSVP to me by email
tibbits@rice.edu
Details will follow**

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Now is the time to make your plans to attend the

[CASETA Symposium](#)

April 27-29, 2018

Witte Museum, San Antonio

[Registration is now open.](#)

The program details are now posted on the [CASETA website.](#)

Our keynote speaker will be

Eleanor Jones Harvey, Senior Curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum,

And formerly Curator of American Art at the Dallas Museum of Art,

Speaking about Early Texas Art in the National Context.

We'll have sessions focusing on Georgia O'Keeffe as a Texas artist, "The Texas Scene is the American Scene," Early Spanish Art in Texas, Fort Worth artist McKie Trotter, Eleanor Onderdonk, a talk with Richard Stout, and a panel discussion on controversial images in Texas art.

As usual we'll have fun seeing and buying the art brought by our many supportive dealers in the Texas Art Fair; and as a special treat, we'll tour the John Nau Collection of Texas Art at the San Antonio offices of Silver Eagle Distributorship.

Get the [CASETA rate for your hotel by booking by March 26, 2018,](#) but do it soon since it will be Fiesta season in San Antonio and rooms are limited.

You can now view all the talks from the [2014-2017 symposia](#) on Youtube via the CASETA website.



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Current Exhibitions:

Galveston, Rosenberg Library

"Never a Dull Moment: The Art of Grace Spaulding John" January 20 – July 20, 2018

In partnership with the Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art (CASETA)
Rosenberg Library cordially invites you to preview the new exhibit

Never a Dull Moment
•••
THE ART OF
GRACE SPAULDING JOHN

Saturday, January 20, 2018
6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.
Harris Gallery, 4th Floor

with a guest lecture by
RANDY TIBBITS
to begin at 6:30 in the Fox Room

complimentary wine and light refreshments



Self-Portrait
Grace Spaulding John (1890-1972)
oil on canvas, 1923
Gift of Paticia John Keightley



Grace Spaulding John [two panels for the Balinese Room, Galveston] 1950s etched plexiglass panels. John made these two for the famed Balinese Room. They were swept away, along with the Balinese Room itself, and the pier on which it stood, by Hurricane Ike in 2008. So they are not in the show at the Rosenberg Library, but lots of great John paintings are.

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Houston

[Protégés: The Legacy of Dr. John Biggers as Viewed Through the Art Works of Thirteen Students](#)

Featuring his students Charles Criner, Gerry Crossland, Karl E. Hall, Earlie Hudnall, Harvey Johnson, Earl S. Jones, Josie Mendoza Postel, Robert Meyers, Kermit Oliver, Elizabeth M. Shelton, Jesse Sifuentes, Charles L. Thomas, and Roy Thomas

January 19 - February 10, 2018

[William Reaves|Sarah Foltz Fine Art](#)

2143 Westheimer, Houston, Texas 77098 713.521.7500

Fort Worth

[McKie Trotter III: SCAPES](#)

Selected works by McKie Trotter III (1918-1999), Fort Worth Circle Artist and TCU Professor

Moudy Art Gallery, Texas Christian University

January 18 – February 8, 2018

Austin

[Flight & Fall: Charles Umlauf's Dualities](#)

December 12, 2017 - March 11, 2018

UMLAUF SCULPTURE GARDEN & MUSEUM

605 Robert E. Lee Road

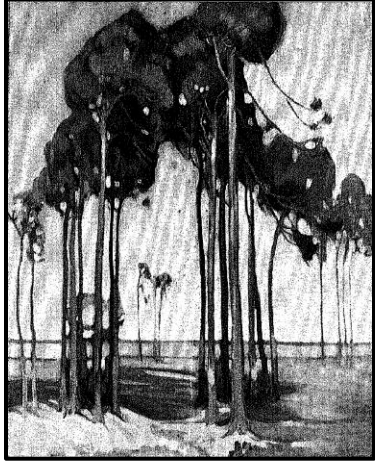
Austin, Texas 78704

512-445-5582

Upcoming exhibitions:

For a pair of exhibitions to be mounted in the fall of 2018 at The Heritage Society Museum and The Ideson Gallery of Houston Public Library, the curatorial teams are looking for images of Mexico by Houston artists and images of Houston by Houston artists, done before 1979. I know that many of you will have works in your collections that fit the criteria, and we would love to know about them. Please email us images including Artist/Title/Date/Medium/Dimensions to tibbits@rice.edu

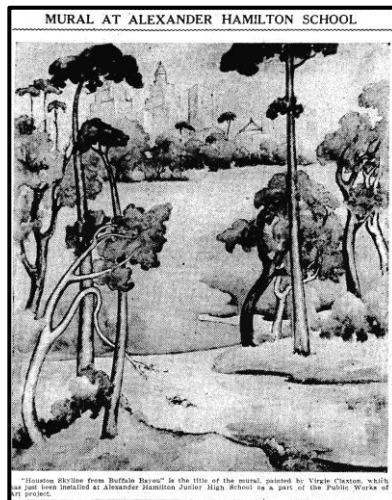
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Ruth Pershing Uhler *Bayshore* Oil on Canvas c1930s (1); Uhler at her desk with *Bayshore* hanging on the wall behind her, c1934. Now lost.

The mission of HETAG is to illuminate Houston's art history by providing viewing opportunities for art, by supporting and doing research on the artists and art communities working in Houston through the years, and by spreading the word.

**Randy Tibbits, coordinator
HETAG: The Houston Earlier
Texas Art Group
tibbits@rice.edu**



Virgie Claxton *Houston Skyline from Buffalo Bayou* c1930s, mural painted for Alexander Hamilton High School. Now lost.

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“Our Little Gallery” of Abstract Art in Houston, 1938

(Note: An earlier version of this piece appeared in the CASETA Newsletter, Sept. 2008)

In May, 1938, Houston newspapers ran arts notes about the opening of a new gallery in town:

Small Gallery Is Established Here for Exhibit of Works by Local, Out-OF-Town Artists
Art Colony Greet Little Gallery
Abstract Works Put on Display¹

The opening of a gallery in any American city outside the major art centers on the coasts or in the industrial mid-west was a newsworthy event in those days. But the real excitement that surrounded the opening of Our Little Gallery (as it was called) might have been best caught by a title combining those in all three articles:

Small Gallery Is Established Here for Exhibit of **Abstract Works by Local Art Colony.**

Who would have thought that Houston, in 1938, had a local art colony making enough abstract work to fill a closet, let alone a gallery. That, for Houston, was news!

According the *Houston Press*, “the present gallery has been brought into being by McNeill Davidson and a group of her co-workers, Christine Garland, Robert Preusser, Frank Dolejska, Gene Charlton, Dean Lee, Carden Bailey, Harley Bruebaker [sic] and Forrest Bess.”²



Ola McNeill Davidson *Watching McNeill* c.1935, oil on canvas, 9x7 inches.
The young man watching Davidson paint is Robert Preusser.

All except Bess were students of Davidson. As a group, they were mostly young: Preusser and Dolejska were in their teens; Bailey, Brubaker and Bess in their 20's; Charlton, at 30, and Garland, at 35, were the oldsters of the group. Aside from Davidson, of course, who was a

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venerable 54³, but regardless of their ages, they were all devoted to that new thing for Houston: abstract art.



Dean Lee [Untitled abstract drawing] late 1930s, mixed media on paper, 5x3 ¾ inches. This is the only known work by Lee and was in the estate of Emma Richardson Cherry.

The Gallery was located in a two-story converted garage at 520 Branard Street in the Montrose neighborhood, the residence of Davidson’s daughter and son-in-law, Barbara and Dr. Hugh Mangum. “Space in the lower gallery will be reserved exclusively for works of local painters. Collections invited from out-of-the-city artists will be shown in the upper galleries.” The first out-of-towner exhibited in the upstairs gallery was New Orleans abstract artist [Will Henry Stevens](#). A collection of “post-war” (post-WW I, that is) German art followed the Stevens.



This is the garage behind 520 Branard as it looks today.

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But the real excitement, from a local point of view, happened downstairs where “the work of a young group of artists following the newer trends” hung. There, “several watercolors are being exhibited by Gene Charlton. In addition there are new works by Robert Preusser, Christine Garland, Dean Lee and Ray Bowles.”⁴

The Gallery also served as a gathering place for the group:

Numerous volumes on current art and translations of European criticisms are available to all. And discussions stretch far into the night as a deeper understanding of art is approached.

Here a young group of abstract and non-objective painters who are attracting national attention by their work, gather daily for study.

Indeed some of them *were* gaining national attention. Alexander Hogue, writing in the Texas Centennial Special Number of *Art Digest* in 1936, had said:

The most progressive artists in Houston today, and the least appreciated, are two youngsters in their early twenties. Carden Bailey and Gene Charlton since they were small children have had the sympathetic and broad-minded guidance of McNeil Davidson, herself an artist.⁵



Gene Charlton [Titles Unknown], c.1937, watercolors, 14x20 inches

Bailey would later go on to a distinguished career as a designer for NBC in New York in the early days of television, and for Broadway, in addition to continuing his painting.⁶ Charlton established a dual career in Houston and New York and later Rome. In 1947 a critic for the New York Times found his work “striking and original” and his use of color “decidedly individual.”⁷

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Gene Charlton [*Cherries on Table*], 1947, oil on canvas, 12 ½ x 15 ¾ inches (1);
Charlton *The Wind and the Trees*, 1951, oil on Masonite, 20x24 inches



Carden Bailey *Wood Tones*, early 1950s, oil on canvas

Already, a painting by Preusser (age 18) had been selected as one of twenty Texas works in the Third National Exhibition of American Art in New York City.⁸ In 1939 Davidson accompanied him to Chicago to study “modern” art with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy at the recently established [Chicago School of Design \(the New Bauhaus\)](#).⁹

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Robert Preusser *Elsewhere* 1938 Oil on Masonite 11x14 inches.

Back in Houston later on, he founded, along with Dolejska, Buck Schiwetz and others, the Contemporary Arts Association in 1947, forerunner of the present-day Contemporary Arts Museum. His national reputation grew through the 40s and early 50s, and in 1954 he moved to MIT where he spent the rest of his career teaching visual arts.

[Bess](#) became the most widely acclaimed Texas modernist until Rauschenberg.



Forrest Bess [*Mission Concepcion, San Antonio*], c.1935, oil on board, 12x9 inches (l);
Bess *Sign of Man*, 1950, oil on canvas, 5 ¾ x 5 ¾ inches (r)

Davidson hadn't originally intended to open a gallery. As early as the summer of 1937, she'd begun planning a "special show for artists of the newer trend" to consist of "abstractions and impressionistic paintings." At one point she and Charlotte Wilcox, her collaborator, intended to mount the show in October, 1937, in the gallery space Wilcox maintained in her Browse About Shop on Main Street. The date had to be pushed back, however, when Davidson left in August for a three-month visit to Europe. A main destination of her trip was the [Paris Exposition des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne](#).¹⁰

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By late December Davidson was back in Houston, and planning for the abstract show resumed according to an article in the *Houston Press*:

A comparative exhibit of the work of contemporary painters both here and abroad, is being planned as one of the highlights of the 1938 art season.

The exhibit, which will be devoted entirely to the work of the moderns, is being arranged by McNeill Davidson and Charlotte Wilcox. It will be hung at the Browse About Shop.

The collection is being drawn from the works of a group of young painters throughout Houston and South Texas and will be supplemented with originals from such outstanding international artists as Benno, O'Keeffe and Stevens.

The entire show is being planned to acquaint the public with the progress Houston painters are making in this new field of art which relies so much on design and color.

It will be the first exhibit of this kind to be shown in Houston under sponsorship of local artists.

'There are so many people who do not understand the work of the moderns and who do not know the progress they are making,' Mrs. Davidson said.

'This show will enable the public to judge for itself just how our Houston painters compare with those who have won a place in ranking art circles both here and in Europe.'

11

For reasons unknown, the Browse About show did not take place. By May, 1938, Davidson and her brash band opened Our Little Gallery as a place of their own.

It's unclear how long the Gallery lasted. Probably not too long. A *Houston Press* article in October, 1938, mentioning new organizations in the city, says:

Foremost is Our Little Gallery under sponsorship of McNeill Davidson. Though not club-like in its organization [as the earlier Houston Artists Gallery had been], it is offering a thoroughly satisfactory medium for the exchange of ideas and work among painters.

Most of the members are drawn from the young moderns who fashion their technique after the patterns laid down by the abstractionists and non-objective artists.

Frequent exhibits of the work of this group as well as out-of-town painters are shown at the Gallery...¹²

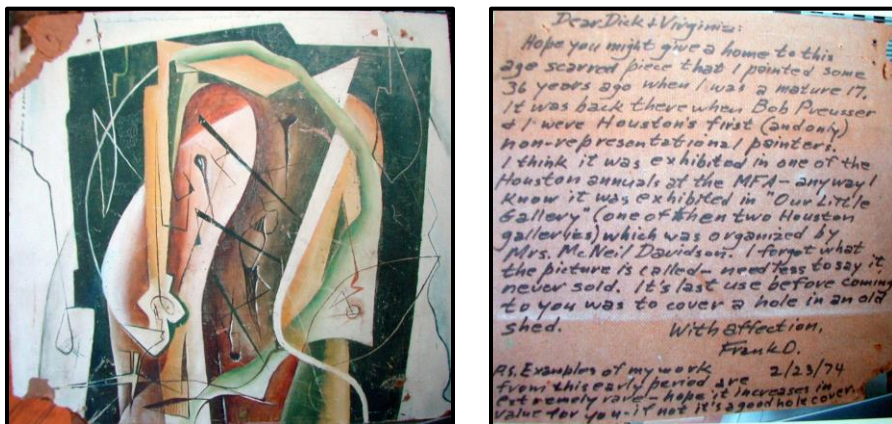
By March, 1939, according to the *Houston Chronicle*, Bess had "a co-operative art gallery in his studio in the 900 blocks [sic] of McGowen Avenue. Associated with him are the following Houston Artists: Carden Bailey, Gene Charlton, Russell Davis, Jan Olmstead."¹³ It is likely that Our Little Gallery had closed by then.

The City Directory for 1939 lists the rear building at 520 Branard as "vacant".

So far, no other mentions of Our Little Gallery have come to light, except for an inscription written by Frank Dolejska on the back of one of his paintings when he gave it to friends in 1974:

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Hope you might give a home to this age scarred piece that I painted some 38 years ago when I was a mature 17. It was back there when Bob Preusser & I were Houston's first (and only) non-representational painters. I think it was exhibited in one of the Houston annuals at the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts] – anyway I know it was exhibited in “Our Little Gallery” (one of then two Houston galleries) which was organized by Mrs. McNeil Davidson. I forgot what the picture is called – needless to say it never sold. It's [sic] last use before coming to you was to cover a hole in an old shed. With affection, Frank D.
2/23/74



Frank Dolejska [Title Unknown] 1938 Oil on Masonite 15 x 16.

Our Little Gallery, short lived and perhaps not broadly appreciated, was a small step but a significant one along the path that took the Houston art world from Magnolia City to Space City. For at least a little while in 1938, Houston, far away from the major art centers of the US and Europe, had a gallery of its own devoted to showing art made by artists of its own inspired by the most avant-garde works of the day. That, for Houston was certainly news!



Maudee Carron *Magic Script #1* 1944 watercolor 8 ½ x 11 ¼ inches (l); Nione Carlson [Title Not Known] late 1930s oil on canvas on board 23 ½ x 29 inches (r)

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1. Titles from newspaper clippings mounted on the same sheet and headed "Participation in 'Our Little Gallery' 1938", *Robert O. Preusser Papers, 1930-1990*, Archives of American Art, microfilm reel 1829. Much of the un-cited information quoted in the paragraphs below comes from these clippings.
2. Kirkham, Ione. "Small Gallery Is Established Here for Exhibit of Works by Local, Out-of-Town Artists," *Houston Press*, May 13, 1938.
3. Most biographical information is coming from: Powers, John and Deborah. *Texas Painters, Sculptors & Graphic Artists: A Biographical Dictionary of Artists in Texas Before 1942*. Austin, TX: Woodmont Books, 2000.
4. The Ray Bowles mentioned here was the 17 year old son of Ray Earl Bowles listed in Powers. He, Preusser and Dolejska all attended Reagan Senior High School. "Youth's Dream Comes True When His Charcoal Drawing is Named Winner," *Houston Press*, May 6, 1938.
5. Hogue, Alexandre. "Progressive Texas," *Art Digest*, vol. X, No. 17 (June, 1936). P.18. Texas Centennial Special Number.
6. Wilson, Earl. "Houstonian Contrives 'Merger' of NBC, CBS," *Houston Post*, Dec. 2, 1951.
7. Devree, Howard. "Artists One By One," *The New York Times*, Jan. 5, 1947.
8. Kirkham, Ione. "Houstonian's Paintings Selected For National Exhibit in New York," *Houston Press*, May 13, 1938.
9. Kirkham, Ione. "Bits of News From Here and There," *Houston Press*, Sept. 22, 1939. 10. Kirkham, Ione. "Modernist Show Will Be Delayed," *Houston Press*, Aug. 28, 1937.
11. Kirkham, Ione. "Contemporary Painters' Comparative Show Here Will Be 1938 Hightlight [sic]," *Houston Press*, Dec. 24, 1937.
12. Kirkham, Ione. "Gallery's Fate Will Be Decided Soon," *Houston Press*, Oct. 28, 1938. The Gallery whose "fate" was to be decided was not Our Little Gallery, but Houston Artists Gallery, a cooperative venture founded in 1930 by Grace Spaulding John and a large group of other Houston artists. It operated sporadically through the 1930s, though with increasingly less vigor. Elizabeth Morris, the group's last president, indicated in Sept., 1939, that HAG would not be revived. "Houston Group No Longer Active," *Houston Press*, Sept. 1, 1939.
13. "Houston Artists Represented In Capital Exhibit," *Houston Chronicle*, Mar. 24,

November 2008

Revised January 2018